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Leadership: Three Key Employee-Centered Elements With Case Studies

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Prologue: Gratitude

“Gratitude” is defined as “the intangible but undeniable display of thankfulness, appreciation, or approval.”

“Gratitude” represents the second of the three key employee-centered elements of leadership. Abraham Lincoln is highlighted in this chapter on “Gratitude.” Lincoln understood the dynamic and impact of gratitude, and he mastered the ability to display it. Lincoln was rarely too busy to display his gratitude to those who supported his vision for the country.

As discussed in the last issue, leaders can exert informal or formal leadership. Similarly, gratitude can be displayed informally or formally. Informal gratitude is usually displayed personally, without an audience, and spontaneously.

Pharmacists, and even pharmacy leaders, tend to be reserved, finding these expressions to be awkward and thus, avidly avoided. But like any skill, expressing gratitude must be practiced to be mastered. What is initially awkward becomes fluid and natural.

Opportunities to display gratitude (and practice and perfect the skill) abound: A technician thanks a pharmacist for assisting in an activity that is usually considered a technician’s domain, such as cleaning a counter, or answering the phone, especially when the technician is inundated and swamped. The “thank you” reinforces the behavior. A pharmacist expresses gratitude to a patient for sharing private and sensitive information: “Thank you for trusting me to hear your story. Please trust that I will use the information appropriately.” A technician or pharmacist expresses thanks to anyone who has provided constructive feedback: “I appreciate the feedback. You have given me something to think about.”

Formal gratitude is usually displayed with an audience. It is planned, administered routinely, for example, monthly or yearly, and in a ceremonial or quasi-ceremonial format.

The pharmacy department at the University of Maryland Medical Center conducts a monthly “You were on Target” award program to recognize staff members “caught in the act” of serving a customer (nurse, physician, colleague) or a

patient in an exemplary manner—one that is generally viewed as above-and beyond expectations—representing the highest ideals of the department. For example, a pharmacist might be recognized for defusing a potentially explosive situation between a nurse and a technician. Or an evening technician might be recognized when staying after the end of the shift, missing his/her bus, to borrow an item that is on shortage.

The staff members nominate their colleagues. The department’s director presents the award at the monthly departmental meeting. The staff is always eager to share their joy with the recipient. Thunderous applause and howls of approval resound as soon as the director reads the nomination and recites the name of the recipient. The recipient receives a \$25 gift certificate to redeem at a Target® Department Store, thus, the name of the award.

Robert Emmons, an acknowledged expert on gratitude and professor of psychology at University of California, Davis, views gratitude as a “**relationship-strengthening emotion** because it requires us to see how we’ve been supported and affirmed by other people.”¹ Therefore, in addition to achieving other benefits, which are discussed in the chapter, gratitude strengthens the connection link by strengthening relations.

1. What is Gratitude? *Greater Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*.

<http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/gratitude/definition> [serial online] (accessed 2013 Aug 3).

Chapter 3: Gratitude

*appreciation • thankfulness • support • admiration
approval • agreement • recognition*

Gratitude combats anonymity, irrelevance, and immeasurment.

In 1864, Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew wrote to President Abraham Lincoln, asking him to write to Mrs. Lydia Bixby, a widow who lost five sons during the Civil War. Here is Lincoln's letter:ⁱ

Executive Mansion
Washington, November 21, 1864

Dear Madam,

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

A. Lincoln

Gratitude is the intangible but undeniable display of thankfulness, appreciation, or approval. Usually the display recognizes a personal quality, an accomplishment, or a deed.

The essence of gratitude for the recipient is self-esteem. Gratitude derives its power from our basic human need to feel good about ourselves. Displays of thankfulness, appreciation, or approval fill that need because we feel good about ourselves when we know that others hold us in high regard. What appears to often be a superficial exchange could be deceptively intense and powerful. According to Sam Walton, the founder of WalMart stores, "Appreciate everything your associates do for the business. Nothing else can quite substitute for a few well-chosen, well-timed, sincere words of praise. They're absolutely free and worth a fortune."ⁱⁱ

But the benefits of displays of gratitude are not exclusively related to enhancing the recipient's feelings of worth and esteem. First, human interactions that fulfill a basic human psychological or physical need, such as displays of gratitude, tend to bond. Bonding promotes connection, which cements the leader/employee interpersonal relationship and allegiance, all of which create an environment more conducive to change. Bestowing compliments or gifts establishes palpable energy transmission between the two parties. At first, the recipient says to himself about the provider, *She likes me*, and he detects a jolt of self-esteem. Then, immediately following, the recipient silently whispers, *I like me*, translating the affirmation to oneself, which in turn produces *I like her*, because she initiated the exchange. The recipient then offers a reciprocating comment acknowledging the initial exchange, such as "I appreciate your comment" or "I appreciate the recognition" or "I appreciate the award," which replicates the cycle in a less perceptible, more compact way.

Here is a sample of a note to high performers:

Sally, Hi! Congratulations on your excellent performance review.

Beth and I appreciate your hard work, effort, and your contribution to the care of our patients and to our department's mission.

We are glad that you are on our team!

Sincerely,
Marc

It is not unusual to receive a reply such as the one below:

Marc,

Thank you for your kind words and recognition.

Sally

This results in two energizing cycles. According to Bil Keane, creator of the comic strip *Family Circus*, "A hug is like a boomerang—you get it back right away."ⁱⁱⁱ

Second, Deborah Norville, anchor of the syndicated *Inside Edition*, in her book, *The Thank You Power: Making the*

Science of Gratitude Work for You, says that employees are “prone to perform better because they know they are valued within the organization.”^{iv} The work environment is pleasing to them, and they are happier.

Third, Norville also cites, “Evidence that individuals who are consciously and constantly grateful to others are happier, healthier, and less materialistic themselves; also, they tend to perform at higher levels.”^v Booker T. Washington agrees: “If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else.”^{vi}

Finally, the gesture or act of gratitude serves as a window into the character of the provider. According to Rabbi Schmuley Boteach, “Gratitude is what establishes our humanity.”^{vii} Gratitude means that you have the capacity to recognize the goodness, that you have the ability to package the recognition, and that you have the confidence to deliver it.

Scholars study Lincoln’s letter to Mrs. Bixby not necessarily to determine the impact on her but what the letter reveals about Lincoln. What does the act of writing the letter and its contents reveal about a man who, after three harrowing years of war, surrounded by impatience and hate, carrying the guilt of the wreckage, with the outcome still undetermined, acknowledges a fellow politician by expressing the “thanks of the Republic” to a grieving widow? How many of us at the end of our normal workday rationalize not sending an e-mail to an employee who satisfied a customer, to a student who delivered a noteworthy presentation, or to a salesperson who captured a new client?

In 135 words, Lincoln displays the qualities and emotions that personify his magnificent aura: his ability to be factual, humble, empathetic, sensitive, grateful, spiritual, comforting, and patriotic, wrapped in caring, simplicity, and eloquence.

Dear Madam,

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle (**factual**). I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine (**humility**) which should attempt to beguile you (**empathy**) from the grief of a loss so overwhelming (**sensitivity**). But I cannot refrain from

tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save (**gratefulness**). I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement (**spiritually**), and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost (**comforting**), and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom (**patriotic**).

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

A. Lincoln

Recognizing that a culture of gratitude might improve overall performance, enhance productivity of the leader and of the leader’s unit, provide insights into the leader’s character, and promote change, “real gratitude is an others-focused emotion in which the emphasis is on the giver,” not for the betterment of the leader nor the improvement of the unit.^{viii} The benefits should be viewed as by-products, not goals of the exchanges.

Although gratitude is usually discussed as a display from a boss to an employee, a coach to a player, a president to a citizen, gratitude is not a one-way street. The appropriateness and value should be defined by the circumstances, the sincerity, and the delivery rather than the direction. This premise sets the stage for the employee to be the provider.

In the workplace, displaying gratitude to the boss gives the employee a platform to exhibit his/her character, confidence, and insight. An enlightened boss appreciates the qualities of the employee that the act represents. Many employees are reluctant to praise the boss for fear of being accused of having an ulterior motive—“buttering-up” the boss. But a wise employee renders those allegations petty compared with the need to recognize another human, even if the other human is the boss. When I have been praised, albeit occasionally, I have never imagined any motive other than the pure one.

A contrasting mode of gratitude is one without a mortal recipient. This behavior exhibits gratitude, not necessarily to others but rather for what one has. The manifestation is

usually a silent, lone expression for one's own situation, condition, blessings, opportunities, friends, and family. According to author and counselor, Cherie Carter-Scott, "What really matters is to create a space in your consciousness for appreciation for all that you have now, so that you may live more joyously in your present moment."^{ix} Doing so creates an inner peace and humility that others detect, which projects confidence, calm, and authenticity, and that in turn contributes to a leadership aura.

Some Final Thoughts

Displays of gratitude have an addicting quality. All of us strive to duplicate the deeds or enhance our overall performances to get another "fix," the "psychic income." Recognizing the cause-and-effect phenomenon, Tom Peters teaches us to "celebrate what you want to see more of."^x

A protocol (script) for verbal gratitude is helpful. Heidi Wall, the cofounder of the Flash Forward Institute, describes three steps:

1. Thank the person for something specific that he or she did for you. (It can also be something the person refrained from doing that would have hurt you.)
2. Acknowledge the effort it took for the person to help you by saying something like: "I know you didn't have to do _____," or "I know you went out of your way to do _____."
3. Tell the person the difference that his or her act personally made to you.^{xi}

Most experts agree that acknowledgments are most effective in affecting employee attitude and performance if the acknowledgments are "voluntary, detailed, immediate, and positive."^{xii} Contrast "Thanks for helping me calm the angry customer who just left," versus "Thanks for helping me with that customer," versus "I appreciate your help today." Some experts believe that constant displays of gratitude dilute the impact of the most deserving displays, but the numbers are not as important as the sincerity, content, and timeliness.

Public displays of gratitude have the added benefit of reinforcing the culture. Marcus Buckingham affirms, "When you bring an employee up onstage and praise her performance, this has a management impact. It will make this particular employee feel appreciated However, it will

also, if you do it well, have a leadership impact. You are pointing to her and telling us that, although she is not perfect, her specific behaviors are the building blocks of our better future."^{xiii}

Books are dedicated to outlining approaches to writing and delivering "thank-you" notes. Four are cited.^{xiv, xv, xvi, xvii}

Revisiting Patrick Lencioni, gratitude-related techniques, practices, and behaviors combat anonymity and irrelevance.^{xviii} If my boss or colleague recognizes me, my performance, or my contributions, then I am neither anonymous nor irrelevant. Also, if the gratitude is supported quantitatively by naming the person who sold the most appliances, scored the most runs, or received the most positive customer comments, then the displays of gratitude also combat immeasurableness.

In summary, one of the main messages in this chapter is to convey the power of gratitude—to expand the reader's paradigm to think of gratitude as not only a simple, meaningful exchange but also as a textured, potent, and significant element of leadership.

"To speak gratitude is courteous and pleasant, to enact gratitude is generous and noble, but to live gratitude is to touch Heaven." —Johannes Gaertner^{xix}

Notes

- ⁱ Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to Mrs. Bixby." <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/bixby.htm>.
- ⁱⁱ Sam Walton, *Thinkexist.com*, "Sam Walton Quotes," http://thinkexist.com/quotation/appreciate_everything_our_associates_do_for_the_149400.html.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bil Keane, *Thinkexist.com*, "Bil Keane Quotes." http://thinkexist.com/quotation/a_hug_is_like_a_boomer_gang-you_get_it_back_right/200279.html.
- ^{iv} Deborah Norville, *Thank You Power: Making the Science of Gratitude Work for You* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).
- ^v Ibid.
- ^{vi} Booker T. Washington, *Brainy Quotes*, "Booker T. Washington Quotes," http://brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/b/booker_t_was_hington.html.

- ^{vii} Schmuley Boteach, *Renewal: A Guide to the Values-Filled Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).
- ^{viii} Norville, *Thank You Power*.
- ^{ix} Cherie Carter-Scott, *If Life Is a Game, These Are the Rules: Ten Rules for Being Human as Introduced in Chicken Soup for the Soul* (New York: Crown Archetype, 1998).
- ^x Tom Peters, *Thinkexist.com*, "Tom Peters Quotes," http://thinkexist.com/quotation/celebrate_what_to_see_more_of/264684.html.
- ^{xi} Heidi Wall in K. Ferrazzi, *When Thanks Isn't Enough: 3 Steps to Gratitude That Empowers*. <http://www.keithferrazzi.com/communication>.
- ^{xii} J. Trinko. *GovLeaders.org*. "What's a Manager to Do?" http://govleaders.org/whats_a_manager_to_do.htm.
- ^{xiii} Marcus Buckingham, *The One Thing You Need to Know: About Great Managing, Great Leading, and Sustained Individual Success* (New York: Free Press, 2005).
- ^{xiv} J. Kralik, *A Simple Act of Gratitude: How Learning to Say Thank You Changed My Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2011).
- ^{xv} Robyn F. Spizman, *The Thank You Book: Hundreds of Clever, Meaningful, and Purposeful Ways to Say Thank You* (Kenneshaw, GA: Active Parenting, 2002).
- ^{xvi} K. Browne, *101 Ways to Say Thank You* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2008).
- ^{xvii} Johannes Gaertner in K. Browne, *101 Ways to Say Thank You* (Sterling Publishing, 2008).
- ^{xviii} Patrick Lencioni, *The Three Signs of a Miserable Job: A Fable for Managers (and Their Employees)* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).
- ^{xix} Gaertner in Browne, *101 Ways to Say Thank You*.